

TITLE: A New Analyst Replies

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~~CONFIDENTIAL~~*Concentrate on substance*

## A NEW ANALYST REPLIES

(b)(3)(c)

In his article "Managing/Training New Analysts" (*Studies in Intelligence*, Fall 1986), (b)(3)(c) makes three recommendations, which he states can facilitate the new analyst's learning process. They are:

- Communicate a sense of our mission and the difference between intelligence writing and academic writing.
- Describe the process of intelligence analysis in a clear, cogent fashion.
- Prepare the fledgling analysts for early failures and provide lots of positive reinforcement and reassurance.

As a relatively new analyst (three years with the Agency) with five years of industrial work experience, I would like to submit a few thoughts on the subject.

## Academic Writing Versus Intelligence Writing

I agree that substantial differences exist between academic and intelligence writing, and refer the reader to Mr. (b)(3)(c) previous article for some excellent examples of those differences. In particular, I believe there is much too great an emphasis on length rather than on substance in much academic writing.

In my own experience, I remember well (both in undergraduate and graduate school) worrying if my research papers were substantial enough—in number of pages, not only in substance. We students used to joke about our reports being graded by the pound. In my experience, however, most professors are themselves responsible for much of this verbosity. As an example, in the graduate-level study program I am now enrolled in, each of the classes I have taken so far has required submission of papers of specified length. In my opinion, emphasis on quantity rather than quality almost guarantees that quantity *at the exclusion of quality* is what you will get.

(In a somewhat ironic twist, I am now forced to read many of these verbose academic-style research papers. Part of my analysis work depends on reporting by various components of NASA, which publishes its reports in the traditional research paper style. It becomes very frustrating for me, now a consumer of this reporting, to wade through the oceans of data and text to find the few drops of conclusions I need.)

## Intelligence Writing: Not So Unique

In contrasting intelligence and academic writing styles, however, Mr. Petersen implies that intelligence writing is unique. I believe that intelligence

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writing is *not* a unique writing style, and that it does not require unique teaching techniques by intelligence managers. I submit that intelligence writing is very similar to writing done for any large corporation or business.

I offer my own work experience as an example. I was graduated from college as a chemical engineer, and accepted a position in a factory of a large chemical company. I had no previous engineering work experience, and was definitely "wet behind the ears." My job was to use my technical skills to improve yields and throughput of our product. I quickly learned that some of the most important parts of my projects were the periodic reports sent to our plant and division management. Let's see how these reports match up to the previous paper's framework for intelligence writing.

#### Focus on the Future

My management didn't want to be bothered with details of previous projects that had failed—it wanted to know what I was going to do *now* to make a project run better. General business practices emphasize that sunk costs (past expenditures) are largely irrelevant; future costs and future rates of return are the most important planning factors. Our management was planning continually for projected future business conditions, equipment purchases, maintenance needs, payroll requirements, and so forth. The past was only useful for guiding us away from things that hadn't worked before, and giving us a basis for action in areas where we had been successful.

#### Write for Generalists Who Are Grappling with Real Problems

One proverb often repeated around our office went something like this: "Reports should be short enough and clearly written enough that they can easily be read and understood in the length of time of the average trip to the john" (roughly five minutes). In addition, we made sure that our conclusions, which always went on the first page, contained all of the important points, because we knew most managers wouldn't get any further than that first page. Industrial managers are just as busy as CIA managers, and can't afford the time to dig through masses of data to find a few pieces of useful information.

It was even more important for me to realize, as an engineer writing technical reports, that many managers in our factory were not technically trained. They were not interested in minute technological details of projects, but, on the other hand, they were responsible for making sound business decisions about those projects. Thus, these managers wanted reports that included only essential details, written in a way they could understand without (God forbid) getting the idea that some technical smart aleck was trying to "talk down" to them.

#### Deal with Essentials Only, and Make Meaningful Characterizations

The temptation to become the "all-knowing expert" of whatever project you are working on is the same in industry and in the intelligence business. The same time and resource constraints also exist in both worlds. In one of my first projects, I was to increase throughput rates on a pigment grinding machine. I initially collected reams of data on every aspect of that machine. It became

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apparent, however, that there were actually only a few key data points to consider. When I reported results to my management, the necessary details became even fewer. I learned to recognize what was truly important in each case, and to spend only the time that was necessary to do the job right at the appropriate level of detail.

Our project reports always started with what we believed was essential for management to know. If a manager wanted to know more, he/she could read the supporting details. If he/she wanted in-depth information about the project, he/she could either call me up and ask about it (this very rarely happened) or request a briefing on the subject (even rarer).

### Begin with Conclusions and Then Explore Their Implications

Using the above pigment grinding machine example again, in the long run, the increased throughput rate of that one pigment grinding machine was only a small part of my project. Our company had many factories, all of which were evaluating new ways of grinding pigment. It was my responsibility to compare our pigment grinding machine's new operating procedures with the other factories' current methods of operation, factoring in changes in equipment usage rates, safety implications, long-term equipment reliability, and so forth. The implications of what the machine would do for our overall business were much more important than just the operation of the machine itself.

### Differences and Similarities

Given, then, that industrial writing is similar to intelligence writing, what can be learned from an examination of a typical company's approach to the teaching of successful writing techniques? Analysis of my own experience leads me to conclude that there is one important difference between industry and intelligence that leads to a lot of analyst and manager heartburn, and one important similarity, which could lead to more effective writing by analysts.

### The Difference: Editing

One of the reasons managers (and analysts) come to believe that intelligence writing is a unique style is the tremendous edifice of editing that has been built up around it. It is my conviction that we have developed a structure that is inefficient, and stifling to timely, accurate, and creative writing.

This conviction became stronger as I became involved with the coordination of my first paper (a joint effort with two other offices). The overwhelming majority of the drafts were returned with few or no comments of a substantive nature. Almost all of the drafts, however, were returned with the typographical errors circled and disagreements about grammatical style (which or who, fully believed or believed fully, and so forth) pointed out. What a frustrating experience. I had expected questions and comments about substantive issues. What I received were everyone's efforts to be grammarians. From conversations with fellow analysts, I have found that my experience was fairly typical.

I'm not sure how this practice of misguided editing came about. I imagine branch chiefs must feel a tremendous amount of pressure to make sure the

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finished intelligence writing that leaves their branches will not only be technically correct, but grammatically elegant. I certainly do not condone grammatical gaffes or obvious wrong writing, but I do feel that attention is much too heavily slanted toward the framework, and not on the picture the analyst is trying to paint.

Needless editing can also lead to adoption of particularly dangerous attitudes by analysts. If an analyst knows that, no matter how much time and effort he or she puts into the construction of an article of finished intelligence, it will be ripped apart because of differences in personal grammatical styles, the tendency will be for the analyst to not want to try so hard next time. Why sweat the details if someone else (or, perhaps more typically, *many* someone elses) is going to rewrite the piece anyway?

#### How Long Should It Take To Publish?

Unnecessary editing can also significantly detract from the timeliness (and thus the value) of our finished intelligence. One analyst I know decided to keep track of the time his intelligence assessment took to get through the review process. Of the 10 months it took to publish the paper, approximately seven months were spent in review by various managers. In my view, that is too long.

If a mathematical equation were developed to quantify the value of finished intelligence reporting, the time between when the analysis is completed and when the finished piece "hits the streets" certainly would be a significant variable. This isn't news to any of us. Unfortunately, our review process often doesn't seem to reflect the importance of timely finished reporting. In our office, we even have an alternative to the regular paper review process, the so-called fast-track or streamlined paper review. This process is used for papers deemed to be particularly important or perishable. Isn't it sad that we have to rely on special methods to ensure that analysis gets out in a timely fashion?

#### So How Did You Do It in Industry?

In my industrial job, my only editor was my immediate supervisor, a Ph.D. chemical engineer, who had engineering projects of his own as well as having supervisory responsibilities for nine engineers. He was too busy to worry about looking up whether an engineer should have used "which" or "that". He *did* ensure that what went out of our group was technically accurate, however, by keeping up to speed on the various projects on which we were working.

How do you keep track of the multiple projects of nine engineers? You don't. That is, you don't keep track of the minutiae involved in every particular project. It was our mutual responsibility, however, to keep each other abreast of significant developments (or lack of developments) in given projects.

Moreover, my supervisor's level of involvement varied as my experience level increased. At first, we worked very closely together. This was beneficial for both of us. He was able to "show me the ropes" in a short period of time, and I wasn't left alone to figure everything out by myself. As my experience grew, so did his confidence in my abilities and judgment. I was left increasingly on my own to decide the technical merits of my projects.

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My supervisor took the same approach toward my written reports as he did to my project engineering work. At the beginning, he spent sufficient time with me to make me comfortable with my company's report writing style. He went over the first few reports I wrote, with the attitude of making sure my logic fit in with the desired format. After the first few reports, I was pretty much on my own. My supervisor still *saw* my reports before they were disseminated, but if they were accurate, he didn't make changes.

What is my point? Simply that it is important not to let the process take precedence over the product. The purist may argue, correctly, that perhaps my reports were not as elegantly composed as they could have been. But I did put out reports that were timely, as well as technically accurate. They were good enough. As time went on, I know my writing improved. The important thing was, however, that I improved *as* I produced, as opposed to improving *instead* of producing.

One more thing. It was recognized by our plant management that my manager was not responsible for my writing style. If the report was factually correct, my manager had done his job. If the writing was not elegant, that was *my* fault, not my manager's.

#### A Possible Solution

In my opinion, employing the services of the central editorial staff within the DI earlier in the production process could go a long way toward solving the problem of turning out timely, accurate reports. This staff in the Office of Current Production and Analytical Support consists of professionally trained editors, and is responsible for ensuring that all papers are published in the "DI style."

The writing process I propose would go as follows. The analyst works closely with his/her branch chief and with substantive authorities for coordination, in the preparation of the first draft. Close, frequent contact between analyst and branch chief ensures as much as possible that everything stays on track and on focus. In this phase, the steps Mr. (b)(3)(c) outlined in his "Framework for Analysis" can be particularly helpful.

When the first draft is completed, the branch chief and the analyst satisfy themselves that the facts and the logic of the paper are correct, and that they are getting their points across clearly. A certain amount of editing is necessary in this stage, but it should be limited to that needed to ensure that the report is accurate and understandable.

Once the branch chief and the analyst are satisfied with the first draft, they send it to the central editorial staff. This staff ensures that the paper reads "in the DI style" and is understandable to the intended audience. The staff is in frequent contact with the analyst, so that questions about what the analyst meant by a particular statement, or how the analyst wants the graphics to look, can be resolved quickly.

When the central editorial staff finishes with the paper, it announces that a paper on subject X has been completed, and anyone with knowledge in this area who would like to see the paper for comments can go to the central

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editorial staff office and do so. (Note: This is purely a precaution. Those with knowledge in the subject area were consulted in preparation of the draft. The announcement is just a way to ensure that all legitimate concerns are addressed, and that no one is trying to sneak a paper out without proper review.) The staff and the analyst who wrote the paper handle substantive comments, getting in touch with the commenting analyst as necessary. Stylistic comments are handled between the staff and the commenting analyst. Once the comments are resolved, the paper is published.

This system would accomplish several tasks. First, it would remove the pressure on branch chiefs and analysts to overedit their work. Many of us agonize over our papers too much, with the result that we lose much of the timeliness of the information. In our effort to make things look good, we sometimes forget that our product is not reports, it is information—information that quickly loses its value. A central staff handling hundreds of papers a year will be farther ahead on the learning curve than a single analyst, who publishes on the order of one paper per year, could ever hope to be. The timeliness and quality of our publications should both rise as a result.

Secondly, having all DI papers go through this central staff earlier would ensure that all papers would be written in the same DI style. As even I, with my relatively short tenure here, have learned, desired writing styles change over time. It would be much faster, easier, and, I submit, cheaper, to effect these changes in all their subtle nuances with a small staff of professional writers than with hundreds of analysts.

A third benefit would be that this central editorial staff would allow the analysts more time to do analysis, at no expense to the Agency in terms of lost production of finished intelligence. The present system can require several months of the analyst's time in poring over suggested changes, editorial comments, draft revisions, and so forth—time that I believe could be better spent in analyzing new problems. We could let the full-time writers polish the writing, and let the analysts analyze.

### The Similarity: Learning by Doing

I believe the best way to learn appropriate writing techniques is on the job. I learned to write in my company's particular nuance of the general industrial style by writing real reports, not by completing "make believe" assignments to hand in to my boss. I don't think many companies have the time to go through those kinds of exercises.

I believe the same framework for constructive education about effective writing from one's own supervisor exists within our Agency. Most good branch chiefs are good writers (otherwise, they wouldn't have made it to branch chief). I believe the most effective way to train a new analyst to write correctly is to have his/her own branch chief give a brief summary about why and how we write. The steps mentioned above and in the earlier article are an excellent way to do this.

Next, I would suggest that the new analyst begin writing short articles of current intelligence for some of our many publications. In my view, our

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Agency is well set up for this type of writing instruction. In the Office of Scientific and Weapons Research, we have a daily publication for disseminating current intelligence (the *Science and Weapons Daily Review*). This is a good forum for writing by new analysts. One of the most important things for managers to remember is not to let the analyst get too hung up on the format. A review of other similar pieces should quickly give the analyst the desired format without raising excessive anxiety about getting the line length right, and so forth.

Some may take exception to my position that the branch chief should teach writing. I feel very strongly that this is the most effective method. If branch chiefs can't perform this function, they should be in a different position.

**Help for Branch Chiefs**

As I mentioned above, I don't feel managers should be responsible for analysts' writing styles. What, then, should be done about analysts who don't seem to have the knack for reporting intelligence in a way that is interesting for the reader? Are these analysts doomed to poor performance reviews?

No. But there's more than one way to skin a cat, and just because we're in the intelligence business doesn't mean we can't go outside the Agency to get the help we need. This is the age of consultants, and one area where I feel consultants can be particularly effective is in giving seminars on effective writing techniques. The company I worked for had regularly scheduled writing seminars, in which writing experts would offer their insight into what makes one style of writing interesting, another boring. OSWR management sponsored such seminars in April 1986 and December 1987. I believe they were very well received.

**New Analysts Do Not All Have the Same Needs**

Mr. (b)(3)(c) also addressed, albeit briefly, the need for mentoring, or, as it was called, hand-holding. I feel this is particularly important for new analysts of any age or experience level. I would make a careful distinction between the kinds of mentoring necessary, however. A new analyst straight out of college may need some initial assistance in adjusting to the work environment. College is different from the workplace. There are different rules of etiquette to be observed, and different expectations.

The analyst who has had previous work experience, however, probably already has a handle on appropriate behavior patterns. These analysts need something closer to a quick walk-through of the "way things are done around here," an idea of performance expectations, and access to a good resource person who knows the nuts and bolts of the Agency's system of management. Most new analysts are, I would submit, eager to please, and only wish to be pointed in the right direction.

**Preparing the Fledgling Analyst for Failure?**

The third major point of the previous article was to prepare the fledgling analysts for early failures and provide lots of positive reinforcement and

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reassurance. The author stated that "Each analyst must learn the job as each before him has, essentially by trying, falling short, and trying again."

I feel very strongly that "to prepare the fledgling analysts for early failures" while providing "lots of positive reinforcement and reassurance" is exactly the wrong way to approach the training of new analysts. This approach is analogous to a trainer teaching a young pugilist to box by putting him in the ring against the heavyweight champion. It doesn't matter how much encouragement the trainer gives his pupil, the pupil is going to get pounded into the canvas. When the cards are so stacked against you that you have no chance of succeeding, serious frustration is bound to set in. Systems that are set up for people to learn by failure and frustration are systems that will lead to *more* failure and frustration.

My suggestion? Prepare fledgling analysts for early *success*. The earlier article contended that "In many cases, you will be the first person ever to tell [the new analysts] their work does not measure up." I disagree. Anyone who has made the transition from high school to college has had to adjust to different expectations. This Agency has a reputation for hiring intelligent people (no pun intended), but I haven't seen anyone walking on water around here yet. We all had to make some initial adjustments.

Unfortunately, preparing new analysts for success requires more forethought and preparation by managers than the "learn by failure" mode. Preparing for success also requires more "up-front" training, so that, for example, the branch chief knows that the analyst has the literary tools required to write a major paper by the time he has finished his research.

We know, however, that the literary tools are only a part of what we need in order to succeed. I would not presume to speak as an expert on the quality of the Agency's management-analyst relationships. I have had some experience as a foreman for production and shipping crews in my previous industrial employment, so I have had the opportunity to learn a few things about relationships with superiors, peers, and subordinates. One of the most important lessons I learned was that if I wanted to get good performance from my crew, I had to believe that they *wanted* to do a good job, that they were *capable* of doing a good job, and that they *would* do a good job. Shortcomings of my crew's performance in any of these areas meant that I had to reevaluate my own performance to determine how I was keeping my employees from doing their best work. Employees tend naturally to rise (or sink) to your level of confidence in them and your respect for their abilities. Statements such as were made in the previous article about new analysts "driving you insane," or "punching this guy" for his incompetence, or having to "hammer" missions and essences into the analyst's head, have no place in management—even in jest.

Many authors have written books on effective management techniques—there are enough of them that one could certainly spend one's life just *reading* about management and never *doing* it. I see no need in adding to the clutter. I would, however, in closing, like to pass on for consideration the most valuable piece of management advice I have yet received. It goes like this: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

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